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## The LGBTQ Glass Ceiling: When Will it Be Dismantled?

By Jeffrey B. Trammell // Volume 27, Number 4 // July/August 2019



The presidencies of universities and colleges are largely the province of those assumed to be heterosexual. That is a fact borne out by history as well as by today's scant numbers of LGBTQ academic leaders.

To those of us who have served in leadership positions in higher education, it is not surprising that most major American universities and colleges have not appointed an out LGBTQ president and likely have not even seriously considered a well-qualified openly LGBTQ candidate for their presidencies. Of the approximately 4,000 universities and colleges in the United States, evidence suggests that only 81 have named openly LGBTQ presidents at some

point, 53 of whom are currently serving—mostly at smaller independent or regional institutions.

To underscore how these opportunities to become a president have been shaped by the nation's political climate, of the 81 former or current out LGBTQ presidents, 65 are from states that Hillary Clinton carried in 2016 and only 15 are from states carried by Donald Trump. In addition to state and regional environments that are traditionally unwelcoming to prospective LGBTQ candidates, many of America's most prestigious universities and colleges have also shied away from LGBTQ leadership, influenced by the discomfort of trustees or concern about donor or alumni reaction.

If leading universities and colleges fully embrace diverse student bodies, faculty, and staff, then why has there never been an openly LGBTQ president of an Ivy League, Atlantic Coast Conference, or Southeastern Conference university? Note that the Big Ten and Pacific-12 Conference institutions have each had one chief executive: Biddy Martin, who served as the chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Ana Mari Cauce, who serves as the president of the University of Washington. And another major higher education player, the State University of New York system, named openly lesbian Kristina Johnson as its chancellor. There is much to learn from the experience of the LGBTQ pioneers who fought their way through the bias in higher education, most acutely reflected among trustees. On average, today's higher education trustees are markedly older than in the past and are much less diverse than the faculty, staff, or students of the institutions they govern. It follows that older trustees, on the whole, are not yet true champions of diverse talent and less inclined to consider or appoint even well qualified LGBTQ presidents. The facts seem to bear this out.

Nonetheless, there are recent advances, which are important to note. But first let's take a look at what it was like for LGBTQ leaders in higher education in the past. How have the qualities sought by selection committees advanced? And where does the evolution proceed from here?

## **LGBTQ PIONEERS**

The first time I heard about Chuck Middleton was from a friend serving in the Obama administration. He said, "You have to meet Chuck Middleton. Had he not been gay, he would have been the president of an Ivy League university."

Needless to say, that caught my attention. As the first openly gay chair of the board of trustees of the College of William & Mary, I had long been dismayed by the rarity of LGBTQ leaders in American higher education. I knew I had to meet Middleton and learn more about his story and those of so many others who had faced outsized barriers at American universities and colleges. The openly gay Middleton did become a university president at Roosevelt University in 2002. Despite the widespread respect he commanded in higher education, he was not subsequently recruited for the top position at any of America's "big name" institutions. Middleton found that being openly gay was a deal breaker in several presidential searches at major universities. By then Middleton had decided the closet was no place for him and his partner, whose career was also in higher education, and instead he became a role model for the next generation.

In 2010 Middleton founded the LGBTQ Presidents in Higher Education, an organization whose mission is to battle discrimination and foster outstanding future presidents ([www.lgbtqpresidents.org](http://www.lgbtqpresidents.org)). Recently retired from Roosevelt, he continues to build the LGBTQ presidents organization, which meets regularly and serves as a powerful resource for its members.

Others fought the battle with varying success. The late David Adamany was a highly successful president at Wayne State University before being named the president of Temple University.

He survived generational and political minefields in part by seldom mentioning his life partner. As a recognized up-and-coming star within the academy, he applied for the presidency of a leading, nationally ranked state university. Despite his compelling credentials, he was dismissed from consideration. The chair of the search committee at that university later privately acknowledged that Adamany was rejected because of his sexual orientation. Of course, such discrimination was never reflected in the official records of the selection process. Likewise, Theo Kalikow was a trail-blazer for LGBTQ university leaders. In 1994 she was named the president of the University of Maine at Farmington and remained in that position for 18 years. Kalikow had been open about her sexual orientation since she was in college so there was no surprise during the selection process. In fact, Kalikow may have been the first university president in higher education to have been out during her entire academic career. A January 1998 article published in *Women in Higher Education* observed that Kalikow's "frankness has probably lost her some jobs." In fact, she said that when offered the University of Maine at Farmington presidency, she looked the chancellor in the eye and said, "You should know that I'm a lesbian. I'm coming here with my partner and we're going to live together in the president's house. And if you don't want to offer me the job because of that, it's okay. I'm not going to sue you." Kalikow, now in retirement but still consulting in higher ed, says that it was her nature to always be out, but she knows that this was not possible for many of her LGBTQ colleagues.

A January 2016 article published in *Inside Higher Ed* quoted Thomas Minar, the president of Franklin College, as saying, "I know I didn't get presidencies because I'm gay. Minar noted that while a vice president at American University he went through presidential searches during which his sexual orientation was a deal breaker. Speaking of his selection by Franklin University, Minar said, "It takes guts for a board to go out on a limb and say, 'Here's our new president. We think he's wonderful and extraordinary,' and to be willing to absorb any blowback that that president is a gay or lesbian."

Last year, when openly gay Richard Helldobler was named the president of William Paterson University, his remarks reflected the reality with boards that lingers. In a March 2018 article published in *NorthJersey.com* he said, "The courage of the board of trustees, and acceptance of the community of an openly gay president, speaks to how William Paterson is living their values."

Would a newly named president who is part of another traditionally marginalized group hail their trustees' courage in making the appointment? What do candidates for university presidencies think as they apply? If they are half-closeted do they fear discovery? If they are completely out, will the selection committee reject them because of their orientation? If they are selected, will the alumni and other influential groups make their lives difficult?

## **LOOKING BACK IN HIGHER ED**

Perhaps like other sectors across American society, higher education has whitewashed its past evidence of discrimination toward presidential candidates, administration, faculty, staff, and students, leaving limited evidence for historians to examine.

Despite this obscurity, we can identify areas of the country where discriminatory practices are rooted by noting—conversely—where LGBTQ presidents have served with distinction. In much of the country the opposition to LGBTQ visibility and acceptance is recognized—particularly in the South and the Midwest—where conservative traditions appear entrenched. Further, universities fear alienating generous donors or the political patrons whose support they deem

essential. Many are equally sensitive to the harsh light of media attention that likely makes the appointment of an LGBTQ leader more controversial.

In past decades, when same-sex relations were mentioned in higher education, it was usually in disturbingly venomous chapters. Consider the role of then Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell, who, as revealed in Harvard's Secret Court: The Savage 1920 Purge of Campus Homosexuals, led the expulsion of gay students, resulting in at least one suicide and scores of ruined lives. In the 1950s and 1960s, the University of Florida's president, J. Wayne Reitz, was a key accomplice in the infamous Johns Committee that tracked down, investigated, and expelled gay or lesbian administrators, faculty, and students throughout the state of Florida.

Of course, gay and lesbian university administrators, including presidents, have existed sub rosa throughout history. These men and women had few if any outlets for intimate relationships with others. As one veteran of that era observed, "It was oppressive as hell in those days." Even if a university administrator met a same-sex partner, how could he or she possibly live with that person and explain it? Consequently, the true number of same sex couples was likely very, very small. There also appears to be a higher propensity among gay and lesbian administrators to marry a member of the opposite sex, raise children, and live an otherwise conventional family life.

The Washington, DC-based Mattachine Society, a legacy of LGBTQ civil rights pioneer Frank Kameny, seeks to uncover LGBTQ history through "archival activism." Mattachine notably has been uniquely effective in uncovering documentation of egregious discrimination against LGBTQ citizens in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in federal employment.

Opening university archives, however, has proved far more challenging. When Mattachine president Charles Francis sought records at the University of Miami to shed light on the tragic death of a J. Edgar Hoover gay target who had been hounded out of the Eisenhower White House—Arthur Vandenberg, Jr., the son of the respected Michigan senator—then Miami president Donna Shalala did not cooperate, citing personnel privacy concerns of this decades-old scandal.

Fear of trustees remains a constant, even for straight presidents. Several years ago, when I asked then University of Virginia President Terry Sullivan to join other commonwealth presidents, as her predecessor had done, to push for domestic partner benefits for college faculty and staff, she looked at me blankly. She answered, "If I help on gay rights, they will fire me." That was fewer than 10 years ago that she confessed her fear of one or more members of her board.

While the LGBTQ history of America's universities still largely remains in the shadows, all evidence suggests that wide-spread discrimination prevailed: Students were expelled, professors and staff were dismissed or denied promotions, and well-qualified scholars and academic leaders were denied consideration for the top job.

After all, until the Lawrence v. Texas Supreme Court decision in 2003, sodomy laws prevailed in many states, making same-sex relationships criminal. What board of trustees wished to hire an individual, even one vastly or more qualified than other candidates, if some donor could say the president was violating the law by having a same-sex partner? The Lawrence decision was a watershed for all LGBTQ Americans, making them no longer strangers under the law and removing an insurmountable pretext for lawful discrimination.

Discrimination within universities existed more broadly than in the selection of presidents. Until the last few decades, administrators, faculty, and staff were routinely dismissed, derailed, or denied tenure once their sexual orientation was ascertained. And once their identities were known, LGBTQ students were often quietly removed or left voluntarily to avoid public shame and family disgrace. Today, fortunately, faculty, staff, and students—other than those at some

independent, private, or religious universities—enjoy very hard-won and long overdue safeguards.

What about trustees? While a true count is difficult, it appears there are very few openly LGBTQ members of the governing boards of the nation's universities and colleges. To this day history suggests most major public universities likely have never had an openly LGBTQ member. When I was appointed a trustee by then Governor Mark Warner in 2005, to the best of my knowledge, I was the first openly gay university trustee in Virginia and one of only a handful in the country.

Of course, these patterns of discrimination and bias existed across many American institutions, yet it is ironic that in higher education—despite its dedication to freedom of thought and ideas, concomitant with its embrace of diversity—we still see the vestiges of discrimination across many campuses.

## **WHERE WE GO FROM HERE**

Despite these impediments more universities and colleges appear willing to select LGBTQ presidents. Students and young professionals charting careers in higher education now see that it is possible, if still daunting, to achieve a university or college presidency.

However, the possibility of an LGBTQ candidate becoming a college or university president still seems to depend on geography, which translates into cultural and political considerations. New England, Illinois, and the West Coast demonstrate an openness not yet found in most of the South, stretching from Virginia to Texas, as well as the Midwest, the Plains, and the Intermountain West.

Trustees reflect the conventional values of their states and region and tend to act accordingly when choosing a president. Of the 81 presidents or former presidents who are members of the LGBTQ organization, none hail from the second largest state, Texas, while such states as Massachusetts, Illinois, and California disproportionately produce such presidents.

At the national level inclusion of LGBTQ leadership in higher education is not yet common among leading higher education organizations. For example, a perusal of the American Council on Education website ([www.acenet.org](http://www.acenet.org)) reveals little mention of LGBTQ candidates in reflections on diversity in leadership. On the other hand, the website of the Association of American Colleges and Universities ([www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org)) includes substantially more background on LGBTQ leadership and related topics.

What advice would LGBTQ trustees and university leaders give to future academic leaders and college presidents today?

First, the LGBTQ candidate should be direct and honest with the recruiter from the outset. Second, the candidate needs to be sure the selection committee and the trustees who must ratify the selection are comfortable with and accepting of an out LGBTQ president. Third, the candidate needs to explain exactly what that means. As one openly gay president notes, "I made sure they knew not just that I was gay but that I had a husband and kids who would be a visible part of the university if they hired me."

Present-day selection committees must understand that failure to consider every eligible qualified candidate for the presidency is an abrogation of their fiduciary responsibility. Further, the board's decision to consider all qualified candidates, and transparency in doing so, is an essential recognition of the interests of all stakeholders, particularly during an era of heightened sensitivity to transparency and acceptance among students, faculty, and alumni.

Universities and colleges today are at a crossroads in helping shape American values and in reflecting those values. Choosing our leaders wisely means abandoning past biases and the stigma associated with recruiting and appointing the most talented person obtainable. As Middleton once remarked, "It is not so much a glass ceiling that LGBTQ educators face but a Plexiglas ceiling. It cannot be shattered. It must be physically removed and set aside by the powers that run higher education." The ceiling has been loosened and it is now up to colleges and universities to remove it once and for all.

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